*The Tipping Point*: *How Little Things Make a Big Difference*

Technology / Leadership Book Summary

Summarized by: Maridale Still

*The Tipping Point: How Little Things Make a Big Difference* by Malcolm Gladwell

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The *Tipping Point* by Malcolm Gladwell is the story of how unexplained changes that happen in everyday life can come to be thought of as epidemics. It might be a small change; possibly an idea, product or behavior that begins spreading like a flu virus. He discusses with all epidemics there is a certainty that change is likely and that people can drastically alter their behavior or beliefs when there is the right kind of momentum. He states that the world appears permanent and steady, but in reality with the slightest shove in the right direction things can be tipped.

He begins his illustration with an example and asks everyone to think back to the trendy fad around Hush Puppies shoes. He discusses how the brushed suede shoes “had been all but dead” until they made their comeback in 1994. It took a few kids in Soho to buy the shoes in a resale shop. They were wearing them because no one else would wear them. All of a sudden the trend caught on followed by designers putting them in their famous collections and the shoes passed a certain point in popularity and they tipped.

Behind the concept of the tipping point is what Gladwell calls the law of the few. This involves the extraordinary people that are able to start epidemics. These can either be described as the connectors, the mavens, or the salespeople. The connectors are the messengers that know a lot of people or that can make friends easily and have the ability to spread the message. The mavens are those that have the ability to find a really good deal and can begin word of mouth epidemics. They use their abilities and offer the message. The salespeople have very good persuasive skills and can send their messages by being able to express their emotions and feelings well.

In addition to the law of the few, there is a stickiness factor that in the right environment, can almost force a person into action. To make this factor plausible, it is necessary that the ideas be memorable and must move people into action. The substance of the message is also important and will help determine whether the message will “stick” in people’s minds. An epidemic can be reversed or possibly tipped by slightly altering with the very smallest of details. There is a compelling phenomenon that allows changes in children’s programs such as Sesame Street and Blue’s Clues to stick with children. Gladwell explains, “These changes resulted in a show that actually helped toddlers and preschoolers develop literacy.” There is also the power of context which has to do with the environment or mechanisms which cause trends to tip into mass popularity.

He also uses the magic number 150 and describes this number as the maximum number of a group of individuals that can have a relationship. Beyond this number, a group or membership size becomes a social and intellectual load. He states that many corporations use this number as a foundation for organizational structures and marketing campaigns.

“A nurse by the name of Georgia Sadler began a campaign to increase knowledge and awareness of diabetes and breast cancer in the Black community of San Diego.” He continues to say that she found that she could rely on hairdressers to get information from women because they were questioned in a relaxed environment of the hair salon. They were receptive in this relaxed environment. This type of thinking by the nurse was as he described, a “band-aid” approach to the problem. But the results were still the same. Sometimes it might be a cumulative, low-key approach that overtime, grows to a tipping point of immense popularity and control. In his afterword, Gladwell discusses the role of the Internet and Internet-related technology. He explains how email and other technologies have impacted the growth and power of trends. But he does warn that the excessive use of these systems can make the receivers “immune” to their outcomes. He concludes by saying that “word of mouth is more important than ever.”

Gladwell, Malcolm. (2002). *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference.* Little. New York: Brown and Company.

